

CORNELL UNIVERSITY
THE SOCIETY FOR THE HUMANITIES

308 WAIT AVENUE
ITHACA, NEW YORK 14850

July 15, 1969

Miss Barbara McClintock
Laboratory for Quantitative Biology
Cold Spring Harbor
Long Island, N.Y. 11724

Dear Miss McClintock,

I know you will be interested in the enclosed report of the Cornell Professors-at-Large Program. We have had an exceptionally good year: I hope you will help us to make next year an even better one.

Please discount any sensational accounts of our recent disturbances you may have heard. Our problems have been severe enough --but not as much so as newspaper readers might be led to believe. Cornell intends to pursue its primary aims of teaching, study and research and has the will and the resources to do so. The program for Professors-at-Large will, so far as it is within our power, continue without interruption or hindrance.

The regrettable loss of President James Perkins is a severe blow, but Cornell has survived other changes of administration and will do so again. Dr. Dale Corson, formerly provost and now acting president, is a distinguished scientist and administrator, who has the faculty's full confidence.

You can expect a most cordial welcome, from students and professors alike, when you next come here as a Professor-at-Large.

I hope very much that you will wish to continue to be identified with Cornell and its program for Professors-at-Large. We are proud to count you as a member of our faculty and look forward to a long and happy association together.

Please come as soon and as often as you can.

Yours sincerely,

Max Black

Max Black
Chairman
Professors-at-Large Program

MB:bt
Encs.

P.S. I have attached some of my own reflections about the Cornell disturbances.

*I hope you're not too depressed about Cornell.
Many of us are working hard for restoration of decency*
MB

Some Reflections About the Cornell Disturbances

(a letter by Max Black to interested friends of Cornell University, July 1969)

I thought you might be interested in an eyewitness's reflections on what really happened during our recent disturbances. The phrase "what really happened" is, of course, too ambitious: the events of last April were so immensely complicated that no historian, however industrious and unbiased, will ever be able to produce an adequate record. Certainly, the national and international press, with a strong interest in the "newsworthy" or sensational and a dismaying tendency to distort by omission, has spread stories that are far from representing the truth as some of us here have managed to glimpse it.

A crucial factor in our recent troubles was the COSEP program ("Cornell Special Education Project"), a pioneering attempt to bring to the campus a substantially larger proportion of black students, who might at the outset be unable to meet conventional entrance requirements as measured by SAT scores and the like. This bold experiment has already scored some impressive successes: within five years the number of black students at Cornell has increased from under 20 to some 250 (with nearly 70 to be admitted for the next academic year). These students' academic progress has on the whole been equal to that of other Cornell students. I remain convinced, as I think the great majority of my colleagues are, that we owe it to ourselves, as a matter of simple justice, that the COSEP program (and its analogues in other universities) shall not fail for want of whole-hearted support.

None of us foresaw, five years ago, the way in which deep-seated feelings of resentment among black students would surface as a militant assertion of "Black Power," with its emphasis upon self-help, cultural identity and a rooted scorn of compromise and accommodation. *Hinc illae lacrimae*. Black students at Cornell, skillfully led by a very "militant" minority, have made progressively exacting separatist demands, ranging from segregated living quarters to a completely autonomous black college. That such demands could be only partly met, barring radical change in the very conception of the university, might have been foreseen.

The immediate issue during the famous occupation of Willard Straight Hall on April 20, 1969 was almost entirely symbolic. The question whether three students should or should not receive a verbal slap on the wrist for minor infractions of discipline was, in itself, petty. Behind this, however, lay much more difficult, and still unresolved basic issues, of the extent to which a university can tolerate and cope with student movements that are frankly and unabashedly committed to self-defined "political" goals, and such self-styled "peaceful" tactics as confrontations and the seizure of buildings.

All of us, students, faculty and administration alike, must bear responsibility for having reached an appalling situation in which

black students had occupied the student-union building and then, inflamed by provocative acts on the part of whites, and perhaps eager to put their "manhood" to the ultimate test, had armed themselves and were on the point of what could only have been a disastrous "confrontation" with armed police. (The black students have insisted that their weapons were intended, not as a threat, but as a defense against an expected onslaught by armed whites. Mistaken or not, such fears certainly played a part.)

I am still convinced that we took the right course, at whatever damage to our public reputation, in avoiding bloodshed and winning some precious time to devise a more humane outcome. If a university can survive only by gambling with the lives of some of its students, it is questionable whether it deserves to survive.

An important element in the whole complex situation was the extent to which the insurgent blacks quickly gained the active support of the white students--not only the relatively few members of the radical Students for a Democratic Society, but a substantial part of the whole student body. To think of repressing a hundred rebels by force makes some kind of sense, at least for police chiefs; but the notion of using what is euphemistically called "law and order" against three thousand students, on the brink of seizing buildings in support of the black students' demands, is folly. If anything could be sure to provoke further violence, it would be the spectacle of brutal force indiscriminately applied, as has happened so often elsewhere.

Widespread student disaffection with the stated values of their teachers and elders is a fact at Cornell, as in many other places. Given the state of the world and the likeliest prospects, such disaffection seems to me, however bizarre some of its manifestations, a good thing. I would be still more disturbed if young people viewed with complacency the devilish litany of atom bombs, chemical warfare, air pollution, destruction of the earth itself--while politicians in high places continue to mouth the old threadbare formulas. Who can blame the young for being angry, or for turning upon those closest at hand? They have plenty to be angry about.

My general impression of the Cornell student body, so far as one can generalise about so heterogeneous a group, is that there is great promise in their discontent. They seem to me, on the whole, to show remarkable good-will and an eager desire for enlightenment. It would be tragic, in my opinion, if their warmth and idealism were captured by political quacks and mystical charlatans. The task for academics at Cornell, as at other universities throughout the world, is to show the young--and by action rather than by talk--that we can still deserve their confidence and respect. It is importantly, a task of education by example, so that abstractions like "objectivity," "academic freedom" and "justice" shall be visibly embodied in the lives of their advocates.

One mildly hopeful outcome of the Cornell experience has been the extent to which students and their teachers are now working together, at

all levels, to make the University a better and more humane institution. I do not myself share the fears of some of my colleagues--a lessening number now, I think--that student participation in university government will erode academic standards and impair academic freedom. Cornell has been, in my experience, the freest university one could wish, where everybody has been encouraged to say what he thought, quite without fear of restraint or coercion. I am sure that the vast majority of Cornell students and their teachers intend to see to it that Cornell remains free.

Please forgive me for going on at what may seem tiresome length. I fear that I have, in spite of myself, made the local situation seem more dramatic than it is. At the height of the "disturbances," I found in the Library students getting on quietly with the jobs of reading and note-taking. Cornell is, and will remain, primarily an educational institution.

Those many of us, students and teachers alike, who remain proud of Cornell and the outstanding achievements of its first century, intend to do our utmost to preserve it as a great university, where men and women who believe in the pursuit of knowledge and the use of reason, and abhor recourse to violence, can continue to learn and investigate together in peace and mutual respect.